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RESISTANCE: Contemporary Architecture - Sustaining Identity 2

Review of *Contemporary Architecture – Sustaining Identity 2*, a one day Conference at the Victoria and Albert Museum, in “Architecture Ireland”, November 2009.

Jim Roche, Dublin School of Architecture, DIT.

Economic globalisation has facilitated a glut of ‘spectacle’ works of architecture worldwide that often fail to celebrate the genius loci of places or the divergence of human culture. With the current crisis in world capitalism causing a meltdown in the mad rush to overbuild our physical environment it is pertinent to consider once again that architecture can actually contribute to a broader existential understanding.

A recent one-day conference at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London posited such a proposition. Curated by the Finnish writer and theorist, Juhani Pallasmaa and moderated by Jonathan Glancy, the Architecture and Design Editor of the Guardian, ‘Sustaining Identity 2’, presented visionaries and practitioners from different generations, cultures and geographies to argue that the creation of enduring, uniquely localised, people-centred space is still possible and desirable.

The conference agenda was preset by several questions:

“Is there an architecture of resistance that stands in the face of commercial globalisation, that rejects the iconic image, that celebrates the spirit of individual place? Is there an architecture that rejects commoditisation and excess? Can architects, designers and engineers help sustain a sense of local identity, both in terms of cultural heritage and the conservation of the environment? How is human identity grounded in environment and architecture?”

Juhani Pallasmaa’s sharp introductory critique almost portrayed our world as a giant nihilistic hypermarket of stylistic games and imagery devoid of any sense of optimism in a shared humanity, with much architectural production driven by the fluidity of capital, the competition for commercial visibility, the rapid

developments in building technology, the ubiquitous computer image and the myth of the creative single individual.

The conference sought to redress the balance between a well publicised architecture that seeks, in Pallasmaa's words, *'to seduce our eye but that rarely contributes to the integrity and meaning of its setting'* and a more responsible and humble architecture that is not so well publicised (if at all) but that is *"rooted in the historicity and reality of specific culture as well as in lived human experience"*. Or as Glancy noted more bluntly: *"local buildings can have meanings while international buildings – whether they be big boxes or swirly things made by computers – often do not!"*

A packed auditorium was treated to an intense offering of ideas and projects from South Africa to Australia and from India to New York.

Jonathan Kirschenfeld's humble housing projects in New York, which he honestly coined 'anonymous architecture' contrasted strangely with his playful, floating swimming pool that moves leisurely around Manhattan's ports. The pool began as an idea for a floating theatre and his presentation ended with a seductive fly-through computer model showing the daytime pool metamorphosing playfully into the night-time theatre - a good use of computer imagery for a delightful project.

Sean Godsell from Australia humorously listed the weaknesses of much current architecture as striving to produce icons (*'you mean 'Vegemite'*), shopping for details (*design them yourself!*) and the over reliance on computer imagery (he still draws everything by hand!). His house, a subtle strip across a dip in the landscape crafted in wood enveloped with a metal grated skin was a fine testament to his plea for a honed craftsmanship with locally sourced materials. His 90 storey tower and war memorial project for Canberra, with one floor devoted to solar research, proposed a façade that can be progressively updated – a possibility he regards as 'responsible'.

Paul Brislin from Arup Associates posited 'unified principles' premised on a radical, pan disciplinary approach in a search for a holistic, sustainable architecture. While challenging the myth of the individual creator this approach also encourages what Brislin termed "a re-appropriation of space by the public". Perhaps this is best manifested in Arup's Druk White Lotus School for 750

pupils in the harsh, remote environment of the western Himalayas of Northern India. Constructed in mud brick, stone, timber and grass roof and used as an educational project for locals and Arup staff, it stood out from many of the presentations as an exemplar of a people-centred architecture suffused with local identity.

The themes of local identity were further explored in a convincing, revealing discourse from three cultural practitioners of the value of research, of awards with a holistic remit, of lobbying political powers, of working with community groups, of designating areas for conservation and of the danger of too many tourists! As Jane de Mosto told us regarding the tourist menace in Venice: *“Tourists are eroding the Venetians perception of themselves.”*

Farrokh Derakhshani, Director of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, elaborated on this concern noting that *“tourism has surpassed nationalism as the motivation for many public buildings”* – a phenomenon so ostentatiously manifested in the Starkitect projects in so many western cities. His choice of some of the Aga Khan Awards celebrated the appropriation of ‘identity’ by people taking ownership of architecture in developing countries. Two striking projects of resistance that he cited were the Grameen Bank Housing Programme in Bangladesh (1984) – where the banks lent money only to women, thus changing the whole power structure of the country, and Louis Kahn’s National Assembly Buildings at Dhaka – where, as a resistance to the military closure of the buildings, locals appropriated the buildings by displaying their images on their tuk-tuks – an ironic twist surely to Pallasmaa’s critique of the ocular centric nature of architectural perception.

In a closing keynote address Charles Correa from India noted that the decision regarding the quality of housing relies as much on land use allocation as design, a reminder that the struggle for a people centred-architecture has often to be part of a wider struggle for social justice. Despite this constraint, his low-cost courtyard housing projects in New Bombay offer good accommodation in a simple multiplication of a basic courtyard form that allows for growth and overlays by the inhabitants over time. He said architects should never discourage user changes – a challenge for all of us to conceive of more flexible, less static architecture capable of changing with habitation over time. Describing housing as *“a system of spaces with an organic relationship between them”* the Bombay projects can multiply to create a dense urban

pattern while allowing a subtle transition between the privacy of room, through to yard, then shared courtyard and finally the community square.

Correa's antidote to the ills of globalisation is to always create a 'sense of place' with buildings rooted in the soil, climate and culture of their locality. Even his 'Tower for rich people' as he called it, reinvents the traditional veranda in double height dual-aspect apartments. His more recent works in Boston were perhaps less relevant to the theme of the conference with his Science research Building on the mouth of the Charles River explained with full colour 3-d computer models, creating an uneasy tension with Pallasmaa's earlier observations.

There were others too: Gawie Fagan, the polymath South African architect whose work on small domestic projects strove for a synthesis of a regional vernacular with responsible modernism. Iñaki Abalos from Spain did not inspire this reviewer as neither did the young lions, Pezo von Ellrichshausen from Argentina whose work in Chile, though formally interesting, was far removed from the stated values of the conference in its self referential nature, its lack of content, its reliance on the formal play of images and their overall elitist abstract artistic approach.

The all day conference was generally a stimulating affair for the turbulent times we live in with Pallasmaa's enquiring words complementing in particular the work of Correa, Godsell, Arup Associates, Kirschenfeld and the mix of Aga Khan Awards. It is a shame that despite the rigorous time keeping and chairing of Jonathan Glancy, both of the twenty-minute slots for audience discussion never materialised, though we were all invited to join the stars for informal discussion on the stage which developed into somewhat of a messy scramble.

This was an inspiring event and it has to be hoped that 'Sustaining Identity 3' is already at planning stage, that the organisers focus thoroughly on questioning the global splurge of commercial architecture and on the role that a more humane architecture can have in the creation of a better life for all humanity – oh, and that they ensure to include the audience in discussion.